DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 363 CS 209 103

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TITLE Differences between American and Finnish Written Business Communication.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 9p.; In: Professional Communication in the Modern World: Proceedings of the American Business Communication Association Southeast Convention (31st, Hammond, LA, April 5-7, 1984) p31-37.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Business Correspondence; *Comparative Analysis; Foreign Countries; *Layout (Publications); Letters (Correspondence); Organizational Communication; *Standards; *Technical Writing
IDENTIFIERS *Finland; United States

ABSTRACT

Some differences exist between American and Finnish written business communication practices. The main difference is in the format: the layout of the documents in Finland is standardized. For example, whereas the American secretarial handbooks give at least seven or eight possibilities for letter arrangement, in Finland there is only one. In 1970 a decision of the Finnish Cabinet directed that the Finnish standard system must be applied in all documents written in governmental administration. The goals of the standardization of office technique are the same in Finnish industry as in government: to set uniform procedures, to minimize the number of alternatives, and to make work accurate. As in the United States, there are also standard sizes of paper. The standard size permits the documents to be horizontally divided into four fields: identification field (name of the company), address field, message field, and communication field. Among other things, this results in a happy typist, who does not have to worry too much about a letter's appearance, since the placement is the same in every document. (HOD)

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND FINNISH WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Eija Mattinen

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In *Professional Communication in the Modern World:*
Proceedings of the American Business Communication Association
31st Southeast Convention 1984
Compiled and edited by Richard David Ramsey
Hammond, Louisiana, U.S.A.
Southeastern Louisiana University
1984 April 5-7

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND FINNISH WRITTEN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Some differences exist between American and Finnish written business communication practices. The main difference is in the format: the layout of the documents in Finland is standardized. The Finnish layout is the same whether one writes a letter, a memorandum, or the minutes of a meeting.

INTRODUCTION

If we take the diction of the American and Finnish business letters, we can find that there are no big differences. The Finnish collection letter, for example, is usually very unsophisticated, factual, meager and chary of words, and it works. Nonetheless, the way the Americans very often write answers to letters of complaint is enviable: I myself have received answers with warm empathy and tactfulness.

The quite-obvious difference is in the format of the letter. American secretarial handbooks give at least seven or eight possibilities for letter arrangement. We have only one in Finland.

STANDARD OF LAYOUT

In 1970 a decision of the Finnish Cabinet directed that the Finnish standard system must be applied in all documents written in governmental administration. Today most big firms have also adopted this standard, and very many of the smaller firms as well. The standard system is now taught not only in business colleges, but also in high schools and trade schools. Nearly all young people in Finland know it.

The goals of the standardization of office technique are the same in industry as in government: to set uniform procedures, to minimize the number of alternatives, to make work accurate. High cost of labor is one reason for changing from the old blocked letter appearance. Research on eye movement indicated the optimum length of line--13 cm (or 5.2 inches). Tendency toward simplicity in our time is not the most insignificant reason.

PAPER SIZE

As in the United States, also we in Finland have standard sizes of paper. The size we usually use is 210 mm by 297 mm (8-1/3 by 11-2/3 inches). This is the international A4 size recommended by the ISO (International Standards Organization).

FIELDS OF THE PAPER AND THE DOCUMENT

The standard sheet A4 is considered to be divided vertically in columns and horizontally in lines. The left margin is 20 mm wide (8/10 inch). One column represents 22.88 mm (about 9/10 inch). We mark these starting points of the columns by C for cicero (character spacing) or T for tabulator. In practice they mean the same. We divide the sheet vertically into eight columns. The edge of the new column is marked by TØ, T1, T2, etc., or CØ, C1, C2, etc. Lines are marked by R, for the Finnish word rivi, meaning "line." The first written line is Rivi 3 (R 3).

The whole document is horizontally divided into four fields:

R 1 - R 8 Identification field
R10 - R14 Address field
R18 - Message field
R60 - Communication field

In Appendices A, B, and C, I have illustrated three letters as they might be set up in a word-processor according to the Finnish standard system.

FIELDS OF IDENTIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION

The first tab is set at TØ, and here at R 3 (Line 3) the name of the company sending the letter will be written, usually in ALL CAPITALS. R 4 at TØ is for location or equivalent--such as street address, name of building, or box number. At R 5 TØ the postal code (ZIP code) and name of city are written in ALL CAPITALS.

The department and the name of the person who is taking care of this case and the initials of the typist will be written at R 6. From this point, one can see who knows about the case and who can answer the questions. Especially in government agencies where the authorizations to sign such letters are very rigid, different persons know about the matter and different persons sign the letter.

If the firm is using a preprinted form, R 4 and R 5 (lines 4 and 5) are empty because the street address, box number, postal code, and name of city are printed in the communication area, lower down the form. Likewise, information such as the sending company's bank, account number, Telex number, and tax number are printed at the bottom of the form.

The date is written always at T4 (fourth tab) lines 5-8 (R 5 through R 8). The dateline is typed in sequence of day, month, and year.

The arrangement thus far, then, is as follows:

	TØ	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
R3	SENDER				TYPE OF DOCUMENT		No 123
R4	123eet Address				Confidential		
R5	SF-00000 TOWN COUNTRY						
R6	Dept;Name of the person / Typist				Date		Pages

ADDRESS FIELD

The lines that identify and locate the receiver are called the address field. They are the lines from R10 through R14. Line R10 is for the real addressee of the letter; but if the letter is written to a firm, the name of the firm is typed at R10.

R11 is the second line for the addressee. The street address or the box number is written at R12. R13 is kept blank, as required by the Finnish postal system. At R14 the postal code and the name of the post office (i.e., the name of the city) are written, in ALL CAPITALS.

The arrangement of R10-R14 is, consequently, as follows:

R10 Motor Corporation
R11 Managing Director Mary Taylor
R12 3800 North Fairfax Drive
R13
R14 00100 HELSINKI

The Scandinavian people love organizational titles. Therefore, the title of the highest office held by the receiver must be indicated; abbreviation of it is not allowed. We don't very often use honorific titles such as Miss, Mrs., or Mr.; but there must always be some professional title like Professor, Vice-President, Chairman, Office Manager, Managing Director before the name.

We don't use any special salutation; the receiver's name already at R10 or R11 is considered sufficient.

MESSAGE FIELD

The message field begins at R18 (Line 18), a reference line which indicates the previous communication--the telephone call, the letter received, the meeting, etc. This is followed, on R20, by the subject heading, in ALL CAPITALS. Because it sums up the main idea of the document, the subject heading is of course considered very important.

The body of the letter begins at R22. All lines of the body begin at Tab 2 (T2 or C2); there is no further indention for the first line of a paragraph. We single-space within each paragraph and double-space between paragraphs.

Subtitles are one of the most useful devices in the standardization. One can get the whole idea of the document merely by glancing at the subtitles. If a subtitle is short (i.e., it doesn't run beyond T2), the text of the paragraph begins on the same line. But if the subtitle is long (it runs beyond T2), then the next line is left blank before the paragraph begins.

If the letter makes an order or an offer or some other legally binding statement involving money, we use the abbreviation pp to indicate that the writer has the right to make firm contracts on behalf of the company (the pp notation is, however, unnecessary if the writer of the letter is clearly the "manager" of the company). The abbreviation pp stands for Latin per procuram and means "for," "on behalf of"; the persons who are permitted to use pp must be declared by the company in a register kept by the government.

After the typed name of the writer, we specify the enclosure(s). The word for ENCLOSURE or ENCLOSURES is written in ALL CAPITALS.

Finally, the names of any persons who will receive copies of the document are listed. The word for DELIVERY or DISTRIBUTION is written in ALL CAPITALS two lines below the last specified enclosure.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the likelihood of its gaining acceptance in English, the Finnish standard system has certain merits:

- The use of the Finnish standard system will result, I believe, in savings of 40 percent work time; and time is money, whether measured in Finnish marks or U.S. dollars.
- The standard is easy for the reader, who will always know where to look for certain points. The subject heading and the subtitles save the reader's time. The comfortable length of the line makes the document pleasant to read and to look at.
- All letters have the same feeling for esthetics and balance on the page.
- The typist is happy, having not to worry too much about the appearance, the placement being the same in every document.

APPENDIX A

```
R 1 CØ      C1      C2       C3       C4       C5      C6      C7
R 2
R 3  SCAN LTD                         OFFER                    1 (2)
R 4  Ranta Street
R 5  70260 KUOPIO
R 6  Sales Manager Mari Koski / TT    4.5.1984
R 7
R 8
R 9
R10  Professor Meeri Suo
R11
R12  Siltakatu 9 B 21
R13
R14  70290  KUOPIO 29
R15
R16
R17
R18  Telephone call Suo/Koski 4.5.
R19
R20  VACUUM CLEANERS
R21
R22                  We take pleasure in offering you a vacuum cleaner.
R23                  All extra equipments are included in the price.
R24
R25  FIXFIX 10        380 FIM with taxes
R26
R27  Terms of payment
R28
R29                  30 days - 2 %; 60 days net
R30  Delivery        week 20  free Siltakatu 9 B 21
R31
R32                  FIXFIX vacuum cleaner is of high quality and has
R33                  several accessories. The power of FIXFIX 10 is 800 W.
R34                  We enclose the booklet to you to get a better idea of
R35                  the usage of the FIXFIX vacuum cleaner.
R36
R37                  I shall call you next week to make a contract.
R38
R39                  Kindly
R40
R41                  SCAN LTD
R42
R43
R44
R45                  pp Mari KOski
R46
R47
R48
R49  ENCLOSURE       a booklet
R50
```

APPENDIX B

BIG CORPORATION
Board of Directors

MINUTES 9/1983

14.9.1983

Time	Wednesday, September 12, 1983 at 10.00 a.m.		
Place	Big Corporation's meeting room		
Present	Mike	Horton	Chairman
	Mary	Ashton	
	Donald	Evers	
	Richard	Stull	
	James	Albee	Secretary

1
Opening — Mike Horton declared the meeting opened.

2
Getting into order

Mary Ashton and Richard Stull were elected as scrutineers of the minutes.

3
Legality and the Quorum

The meeting was found legally effective and binding, because the notice had been sent two days before. Five members of the Board form a quorum.

4
Agenda — The agenda was taken as accepted.

5
Delivery of ten word-processors

After discussion it was decided that ten XYZ word-processors will be delivered from Miller Company within two weeks' time.

6
Termination

The meeting closed at 10.30 a.m.

Mike Horton Richard Stull

Scrutineers

James Albee Mary Ashton

APPENDIX C

T0 T2 T3 T4

R3 DONALD EVERETT MEMORANDUM

5 BIG CORPORATION 21.1.1984

10 Board of Directors

14 USE OF THE CONFERENCE ROOM

16 There has been some misunderstanding regarding
17 the use of the Conference Room. I have studied
18 the case during two weeks and give here the
19 details.
20
21 Unlocked doors The users have left the doors unlocked and the
22 expensive equipment in the Conference Room is
23 within the reach of everyone.
24
25 Tidiness and orderliness
26
27 Papers, pens, and other small things on the table
28 have been left in disorder. Ash trays were full
29 of ash and trash. Also the audiovisuals
30
31 - the videotape recorder
32 - the camera
33 - the tape recorder
34 - the overhead projector
35
36 have all been left on the tables without their
37 covers. Each of them has a certain place in the
38 closet.
39
40 Something must be done to get the Conference
41 Room as pleasant a place as it was before to
42 have meetings.
43
44
45
46
47 Donald Everett